

AUTHORITY

Exodus 20:12

Sixth Wednesday in Lent

April 6, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The Old Testament lesson comes from Exodus, chapter 20, verse 12. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Exodus 20, verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the day is "authority." That's what the Fourth Commandment is all about. It is about God's good and gracious gift of authority. "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). Authority is good. And it is especially good for those under authority. God created authority, and he uses it to serve and protect his creation.

With each commandment so far, we have examined the negative side and the positive side. The negative side includes what we should not do, as well as any consequences for disobeying the commandment. On the other hand, the positive side includes what we should do, and it especially includes the gifts God protects with the commandments. That's really the point of the Ten Commandments. They are not arbitrary rules. They are not a test to see if we are worthy of God's love. They protect the good gifts that God gives to us.

So we'll definitely get to the positive side, but first, the negative side, and this is actually going to be pretty short, because the Fourth Commandment is one of two commandments that is stated in a positive format. The only other commandment like this is the Third. What I mean is, instead of saying, "Thou shalt not ...," it jumps right into what we should do: "Honor your father and your mother." It does not contain the words "no" or "not." So we have to figure out the negative side from the positive side. And this is pretty easy to do. When the LORD says, "Honor your father and mother," he prohibits the dishonoring or disobedience of parents.

And if we understand the Ten Commandments to be a summary of all of God's Law, which I think is right, we would also include the biblical commands to obey other authorities, such as masters, employers, teachers, and the government. These are also biblical commandments, and they fit best in the Fourth Commandment. So when Luther explains the Fourth Commandment, he says, "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise our parents *and* superiors." The Fourth Commandment, generally speaking, prohibits all forms of dishonoring, disobedience, or despising of our authorities. That's the negative side.

Also on the negative side, I should mention the consequences for disobedience. Parents discipline their children when they are disobedient. This is something parents have to do. Children are born with a sinful nature. So for the good of our children, as well as the rest of the world, this sinful nature needs to be restrained. So children are disciplined for bad behavior. Other authorities do this too. In Romans 13, the apostle Paul says concerning civil authorities,

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“Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (v. 3-4). So our earthly authorities, all the way from parents down to civil authorities, possess the authority of God to punish us when we do wrong. That’s also in the negative side of the commandment.

Now for the positive side. And there is really quite a lot on the positive side. In Ephesians 6, the apostle Paul calls the Fourth Commandment, “The first commandment with a promise” (v. 2). He’s referring to the promise God attached to the commandment: “That your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Ex. 20:12).

This refers to the Promised Land that God was leading the people of Israel into at the end of the Exodus. If children honor their parents, things will go well for them. And God doesn’t simply mean the individual children, but the nation as a whole. If children honor their parents, their nation will thrive. They will have a peaceful and prosperous society. Furthermore, God would protect them from external threats.

This was a specific promise for Israel, so they had a special oath of protection. But the general principle applies everywhere. Obedience to the Fourth Commandment protects God’s gift of a long and peaceful life. But the Fourth Commandment only protects this gift indirectly. What the commandment directly protects is the gift of authority, especially parents. Our parents train us to live well. By commanding us to honor our parents, God protects the formative influence they have in our lives. That’s why the Fourth Commandment is the Fourth Commandment.

There is a certain order to the commandments. And we’ve talked about this the last few weeks. In most lists of rules, rule number one is the most important. And that is certainly true of the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” This protects the greatest gift of God himself. He gives himself to be our God. He claims us as his own. He redeemed us through the blood of his Son. The First Commandment protects the place of God in our lives, so it is the most important commandment. The Second and Third Commandments piggy-back on the First. The Second Commandment protects the gift of God’s Name, so that we might call upon his name and be saved (Rom. 10:13). And the Third commandment is very closely connected with the Second. It protects God’s gift of rest through his Word. In the Word of God, the Triune God reveals his Name, that is, the revelation of who he is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So the Second and Third Commandments are very closely connected, and they are certainly more important than anything that follows. Together, the first three commandments protect God’s gift of salvation. There is nothing more important in all the world.

These three commandments are often called “The first table of the Law.” The Ten Commandments are easily divided into two tables. The first three summarize how we are to love God, while the Fourth through Tenth summarize how we are to love our neighbors. And Jesus himself makes this division clear for us. When a lawyer asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is, he couldn’t refrain from giving two. He said,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:37-40)

The Ten Commandments summarize all the commandments in the Bible. And the Ten Commandments can be summarized in just two: “love God” and “love your neighbor.” These are the two tables of the Law. The point of summarizing the Law this way is not to replace the longer list of commandments. Sometimes you hear this distinction made as if you can just love God and love your neighbor and forget all the rest. I often get that impression from theological liberals, but I’ve also heard it from evangelicals. This is a deceptive move to strip the content from God’s Law, so that we can define love in a different way. So the concept of two tables should not replace the Ten Commandments. Rather, it gives us a structure to remember and understand the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments define how we love God, and the Fourth through Tenth define how we love our neighbors.

So let’s apply this structure to the Fourth Commandment. The Fourth Commandment is the first commandment in the second table. I hope you understand what I mean. When we get to the second part of the Law, the part that deals with loving our neighbors, the first and most important commandment is “Honor your father and your mother.” And when we remember the other commandments, that order might surprise us, especially since the Fifth Commandment is, “You shall not murder.” That seems like a pretty big deal. If I were starting from scratch to set out the basic rules for how we treat one another, the first rule I would lay down is, “Don’t kill each other.” The most basic human right is life. If we take that away, the other commandments won’t matter anyway. But think about this: *Who taught you to not murder? Who taught you that you should be nice to people instead of mean? Who taught you to not hit your brothers and sisters?* For most of us, it was probably our parents. Tragically, there are situations where children grow up with bad parents or even no parents at all. By the grace of God they might still turn out okay. But if they do, it’s because God sent someone else into their lives to love and teach them. The point is this: If a child grows up with good parents, and if that child honors his parents, he will never be a murderer. The good parents will teach the child that murder is wrong, and the child will honor his parents by obeying them. Now that doesn’t mean that having good parents will guarantee that he never murders. The child’s honoring must be there too. And the honoring doesn’t guarantee a good result either. The good teaching and example of the parents must also be there. But if both sides do what is commanded of them—if the parents lead, love, and teach, and if the child honors and obeys, then the Fifth Commandment will take care of itself, and so will the others. The Fourth Commandment is given to protect the family, and when the family is protected, our neighbors are protected too.

So we see that authority is a good gift. Whether it’s the authority of parents or government or everything else in between, “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). Authority is a good gift from God.

And I should clarify a few things about that statement. First, this grates on our sinful nature. We have an odd relationship to authority. The best way I’ve thought of to describe it is that we crave authority.

And I mean two things by that. First, we crave authority in the sense that we want strong leaders. And this is hardwired into us by God, because he created the world with authority structures. So there’s something natural about this, but since the fall into sin, it has been corrupted, so our desire for authority is out of whack. Sometimes we worship them as saviors and expect them to do things they really can’t. That’s why every political convention ends up worshipping someone. We crave authority in the sense that we want strong leaders.

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But we also crave authority in the sense that if they do something we don't like, we're ready to devour them. Whether it's mom and dad telling us to clean our rooms or the government telling us to pay our taxes, we don't want anyone to tell us what to do. We have an animalistic craving for and against authority. It's weird. We want their authority to save us, but we don't want them to tell us what to do.

Second, not every person in authority is necessarily righteous. Our rulers have the same sinful nature as the rest of us. But God still works to accomplish good things through evil people. This is true for parents, government, and everything in between. So our authorities are not perfect, and we don't have to look at them through rose colored glasses, but we are bound to honor and respect them, especially when we disagree with them. If God's Word is to be believed, and it is, then we must believe that our authorities accomplish more good than evil. They don't have to be perfect in order to be beneficial.

And third, and this must be understood by all who are in positions of authority, whether it's in the family, the workplace, schools, church, government, or anywhere else, authority exists to benefit the people under authority, not the person in authority. Authority is not a privilege; it's a calling. The technical, theological word for this is "vocation." Every position of authority is a special vocation instituted to serve those under it. In the biblical picture of hierarchy, we always find a servant at the top. In the family, parents exist to serve their children. In the congregation, pastors exist to serve the flock. In government, our elected officials serve all of us who are under their authority.

The greatest example of this is our Lord Jesus Christ, who lived in order to render the greatest act of service: he served us in his death. And he lives again to serve us today and forever with his gifts of salvation. Understand this about Christ: his greatest joy is not to receive our praises. His greatest joy is to grant you the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Good authorities are always servants of those under their authority. Jesus Christ is the greatest picture of this.

The second greatest picture of this is the family. This is the clearest picture you can find in ordinary life. And God structured the family for this purpose: to reflect his gracious authority. Answer this question: *In the parent-child relationship, who serves whom?* Every parent knows the answer, and most non-parents know it too. Parents serve their children. That's the direction service goes. But it doesn't mean parents take orders from their children. Sometimes parents serve their children by forcing them to be obedient.

We've been having fun learning the Ten Commandments in our house. A couple weeks ago I said something to you that reminded me to pick up the pace at my house. So we're working on it. And it really has been fun. A few days ago I was working on the Fourth Commandment with our four-year-old. So he knows, "Honor your father and your mother." And he says it with great enthusiasm. He's quite proud of himself for knowing it. And he said to me, "How do I honor you?" I said, "You honor me by obeying me and speaking well of me." Then he said something I didn't expect. He asked, "Do you honor me?" And I had to think about it. I said, "Yes, but I honor you in different ways. I don't obey you the way you have to obey me, but I protect you, provide for you, teach you, and play with you."

That, in a general way, is also part of the Fourth Commandment. As a general category for all of the Bible's commands regarding authority, the Fourth Commandment includes parents' responsibilities. And for the Fourth Commandment to work the way God intends, so that children will live long and peaceful lives, parents must fulfill what God commands of them. So in Ephesians 6, after the apostle Paul quotes the Fourth Commandment, he goes on to say, "Fathers,

do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (v. 4).

The Fourth through Tenth commandments teach us how to love our neighbors. We love our neighbors by obeying what God has commanded. We don't get to choose how we want to love other people. That would just be selfish, which is the opposite of love. We love our neighbors by obeying what God has commanded us. And this varies depending on our station in life. You don't love everyone the same way. Husbands and wives love each other in a way that would be sinful and very unloving in any other circumstance. Surgeons love their patients by cutting them open. Parents and children love each other in different ways.

Parents love their children by protecting them, feeding them, providing for them, teaching them, and playing with them. Parents sacrifice themselves for their children, sometimes in big ways, but daily in small and medium sized ways.

Children love their parents by obeying them. And a big part of this is being kind to your brothers and sisters. Your parents love you. They want good things for you. They also love your siblings, and they want good things for them. So let's pretend, for example, that it's your mom's birthday. What can you do for her? Be kind to your brother or sister. That would really make her day special. And if it's already close to bedtime on your mom's birthday when you learn this, that's okay; you can give her a belated birthday present tomorrow. Children love and honor their parents by obeying them. And this benefits children, because parents give commandments to their children for their good. We've talked about how God gives commandments to us for our good. Parents do the same thing with their children. This is one of the ways they reflect the gracious character of God's authority.

Authority is good. To be more specific, it is good for those under authority. The Fourth Commandment helps ensure that we will receive what God desires to give to us through our earthly authorities.

Parents, especially, reflect the gracious character of God, because disobedience does not nullify the parent-child relationship. If you are disobedient to your employer, they might just fire you. But when children disobey their parents, the parents have to work to reconcile it. And a parent's effort may be less than perfect. They might imperfectly reflect God's gracious character. But it's the closest earthly picture we have. It's a dim reflection of the Triune God's perfect reconciliation.

The greatest exercise of authority is Jesus on the cross. That might sound weird. You might expect the greatest exercise of authority to appear more powerful. But the cross is really more powerful, because it destroys the power of sin, death, and the devil. And it's a sacrificial and loving exercise of authority. Jesus, who possesses all authority in heaven and earth, exercised that authority by lay down his life for our sake. One of the marvelous aspects of this is that his sacrificial authority overcomes the guilt for all of our disobedience to authority, both against him, and the authorities he has instituted. I know you have all broken the Fourth Commandment. I have too. But, hopefully, your sins against the Fourth Commandment did not destroy your relationship with your parents. And I can assure that it has not succeeded in destroying your relationship with God. He has reconciled you by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That is true authority. Godly authority does not seek its own gain. God has instituted every authority for our good. And we receive God's gracious gifts when we are subject to those authorities. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.